

Recombinant Theatre and Digital Resistance
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Recombinant Theatre and Digital Resistance

Critical Art Ensemble

People are often confused by the ideas of recombination and digitality. The former typically connotes scientific esoterica pertinent to molecular biology, while the latter is associated with information and communication technology. Indeed, these associations are correct, but very reductive. Recombination and digitality are not so specialized. As we shall see, they are the foundations of a new cosmology—a new way of understanding, ordering, valuing, and performing in the world. While some cultural vectors have been faster to embrace digital models than others, no area remains untouched.

Theatre, like all of the fine arts, is now in the process of constructing a relationship with this new paradigm, and this is at times a very embittered struggle. The elder model of the analogic, deeply embedded in cultural institutions, is not voluntarily sharing any territory. Knowledge/culture production in the West has never been a very tolerant practice, and ideas of anarchistic pluralism held by epistemologists such as Paul Feyerabend have never gained much currency. The proponents of any given paradigm aim to eliminate all competitors and thus dominate knowledge production and the rewards that accompany such a position. Theatre is no different from any other cultural vector.

Much more is at stake than the configuration and appearance of theatre in the next century; the formation of digital theatre (in the broadest sense of this term) is a struggle over the microsociology of the performative matrix of everyday life. The digital model, like the analogic, contains both apocalypse and utopia, and the applications constructed now will in part determine the directions in which digital processes will flow. Capitalism is primarily a digital political-economy, much as the medieval economy was primarily analogic. Pancapitalism's use of the digital thus far has been horrifying, whether one considers the pathological separation and alienation of Taylorist production,[1] the false democracy of consumption, the repressive apparatus of surveillance, or the biotechnologies of eugenics. Digital culture is on this same trajectory, with its primary manifestation being an invasive mass media that functions as a reproduction and distribution network for the ideology of capital.

In spite of this parade of the usual suspects that constitute the undesirable hegemony of pancapitalism, there has always been a resistant cultural undercurrent in the digital. The first evidence of it appeared in 1870 when Le Comte de Lautréamont published in *Poems*: "Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author's phrase, makes use of his expressions, erases a

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1. Shareholders' Briefing, *1996. Austrian Triennial of Photography, Neue Gallarie, Graz. Stage setting for a live briefing by the CEO of Machine World, who speaks to the audience/shareholders of new technological developments in relationship to their military applications and their potential profit. Audience members also receive a written report as they are shown to their seats by a Machine World hostess. (Photo courtesy of CAE)*

false idea, and replaces it with the right idea." In three sentences Lautréamont summed up the methods and means of digital aesthetics as a process of copying—a process that offers dominant culture minimal material for recuperation by recycling the same images, actions, and sounds into radical discourse. Over the past century, a long-standing tradition of digital cultural resistance has emerged that has used recombinant methods in the various forms of combines, sampling, pangender performance, bricolage, detournement, readymades, appropriation, plagiarism, theatre of everyday life, constellations, and so on. Maintaining this historical tendency by further refining methods, finding new applications, furthering its theoretical articulation, and increasing its rate of manifestation is an ongoing task for those who hope to see the decline of authoritarian culture.

The Analogic and the Digital

During the millennia it dominated, the cosmological paradigm of an analogic universe may not have made the world perfectly intelligible, but perhaps it offered a sense of certainty about the cosmos to those who lived within its enveloping hegemony. Merely 60 years ago, no one thought that the analogic model could ever be challenged. After all, the sheer weight of the data compiled in its defense was immeasurable. From the phenomenology of everyday life to the most complex abstractions of physics, one principle of the secular world was beyond doubt: chaos came from order, and order from chaos. The most common experience in life was the construction of complex order followed by its decay. Entropy was the primary dynamic of organized material, and the exquisite moment when order and complexity were integrated was perceived as a brief singularity that was impossible to precisely replicate. The fullest expressions of complex order, intimately associated with the foundation of civilization itself, were cherished and valued above all others. However, over the past 50 years this transhistorical master-narrative, this timeless point of assurance, has found itself in competition with the rapidly ascending digital paradigm. As the digital model grows in influence, surrendering the values and certainties of analogic cosmology will be difficult for many, while the various publics of fully

developed economies contend with the fragmentation and separation that accompany the emergence of a second model for understanding, organizing, and valuing phenomena. For each principle that the analogic model holds dear, the digital model proposes its opposite. From the smallest details to the first principle of the digital paradigm, it acts in a manner contrary to the analogic by insisting that order comes from order.

The conflict explicitly began in 1948 when Claude Shannon, an electrical engineer at Bell Labs, solved the problem of how to send a clear signal over a noisy channel. The solution was to transform the sound into a numerical code that could be transformed back into sound when the code was received. This would prevent any other sound from disrupting or distorting the communication process. The history of communications technology from that moment to the present is the implementation of this idea, along with the deployment of the hardware and software within all communications and information media. In historical terms, the analogic model has died a surprisingly quick death in the field of information and communications technology. The latter half of the 20th century has truly been a revolutionary period in this respect, but the communications revolution is only the beginning. The digital model of organization is rapidly spreading to other cultural vectors dominated by the analogic model. While its entry into other areas of human exploration and development may not be as dramatic (only in communications is the analogic model in a state of total meltdown), it has appeared in almost every sphere of human activity. The real revolution is not computers, the internet, or DVD; rather, it's the rapid change over the brief 50 years during which we have moved from a totally analogic worldview to one that is shared by the digital.

While it is dominant in appearance in the form of the mass media—now literally the domain of the digital—the high end of value is still found in the analogic. Here the anachronistic economy of artisans reproduces itself as luxury economy. This is the area where one-of-a-kind, customized, and designer products still rule over the cheap imitations and digital knock-offs.

Digital Economy

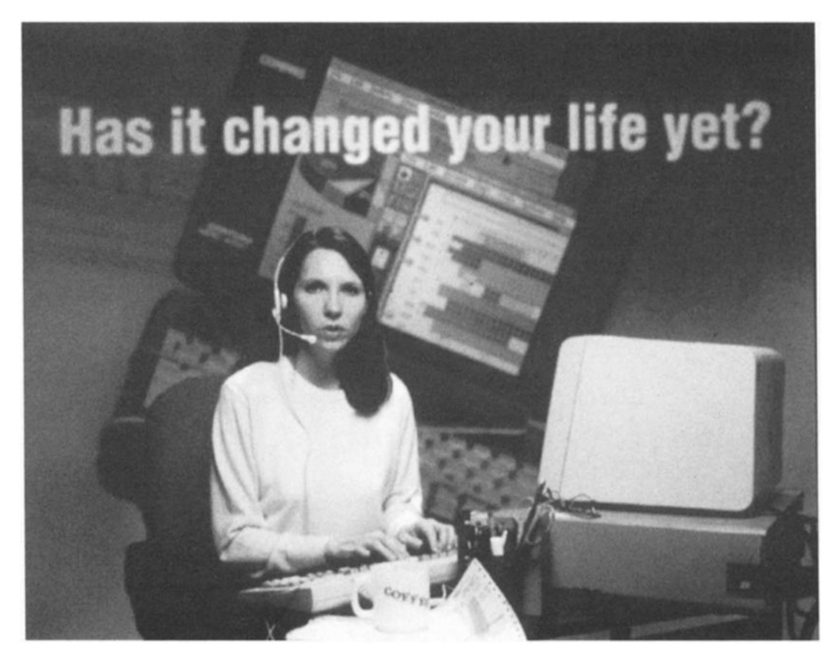
Perhaps saying that the digital appeared approximately 50 years ago is not quite correct. While it is true that the idea was not formalized until the 1940s, it had long been with us in the negative form of that which the analogic could not explain. In fact, whether this was understood or not, the political economy of capital has always included facets of the digital, and thus has created numerous digito-analogic hybrid forms. For example, the guild system in pre-capital had some characteristics that are best explained by an analogic model, while others are best explained by the digital model. The high value placed on producing unique products made by or under the guidance of an individual artisan is an expression of the analogic model, while replication of the workforce through strictly coded pedagogical procedures represents the digital model.

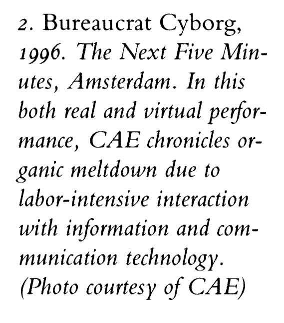
Yet it was not until late capital that the digital became a latent foundational principle in economic development. Complex manufacturing could not exist without an intuitive understanding and centering of digital principles (order from order). Here industrialists were attempting to make products in which the

original and the copy imploded—every Ford Model T was the same as the one that preceded it and the one that followed it. Some physicists argue that no matter how sophisticated the process may be, manufactured products are still not exact copies, and some Taylorist consultants say that individual products within a given product line can vary dramatically in durability depending on whether they are manufactured on a Monday or a Thursday: indeed, both views are correct. The analogic model cannot be totally dismissed. At the same time, within operational reality, the products are perceived and treated as being the same. They are replications comparable to the digital copies that I can make on my computer of this very article. The products rolling off an assembly line are successful only to the extent that they can stand the test of equivalence; that is, the process offers an ongoing flow of sameness, of order from order.

Hybridization of the two models seems even more peculiar when one considers the Western style of marketing these products. The consumer must hold two opposing values simultaneously. On the one hand, the consumer wants the assurance of reliability provided by digital replication, and on the other hand, desires to own a unique constellation of characteristics to signify he/r individuality. Consequently, manufacturers must provide products that signify both the analogic and the digital worlds. To return to the example of cars, Ford was too far ahead of his time when he quipped to consumers that they could have "any color of car they want, as long as it's black." The purity of the digital model does not account for cultural lag; in spite of the digital domination of the assembly line, the analogic still dominates aesthetic value. The lesson learned from this is that in the practical arena of the commodity, precise replication is more desirable; however, in the aesthetic realm of the commodity, the appearance of difference is more desirable. Today auto manufacturers offer a digital infrastructure with an analogic superstructure. All types of colors, designs, and features are offered in a car in order to give the impression of difference and retain the analogic value of the unique precious object.

To this day, digital aesthetics is still on the economic margins. While it is dominant in appearance in the form of the mass media—now literally the domain of the digital—the high end of value is still found in the analogic. Here




2. Bureaucrat Cyborg, *1996. The Next Five Minutes, Amsterdam. In this both real and virtual performance, CAE chronicles organic meltdown due to labor-intensive interaction with information and communication technology. (Photo courtesy of CAE)*

the anachronistic economy of artisans reproduces itself as luxury economy. This is the area where one-of-a-kind, customized, and designer products still rule over the cheap imitations and digital knock-offs. Custom-made jewelry, haute couture, and high art are still the signifiers of privilege that underlie aesthetic value. They are perfection in a world of counterfeits. The luxury market is closely related to high culture, but as we shall see, this secular field of sacred privilege is also being quietly plundered by the digital.

Digital Science

Even science has had to contend with the advancing digital paradigm. True, the elder sciences of physics and chemistry have held tenaciously to their analogic version of the cosmos, but the youthful discipline of biology, in a sublime moment of oedipal revolution, has rejected the analogic model of its elders as being useless. Central to this discussion is the discovery of DNA. In the 1940s, it was already known that heredity is controlled by genes; that genes are located on chromosomes found in cell nuclei; and that genes are produced by DNA. However, DNA was not really understood in terms of its function and potential. It was not until Francis Crick and James D. Watson were able to imagine the structure of DNA in 1953 that its true potential was realized. According to human genome scientist Maynard Olson, Crick and Watson's discovery was meaningful because it occurred within the atmosphere of a formalized digital paradigm. They intuitively understood that DNA was not analogic (order from chaos), but instead digital (order from order). This type of modeling made possible the biological understanding of the production of life. Information replication in the body is analogous to digital copying on a computer. Information is stored as DNA (in a base 4 format, rather than in a base 2 format as used by computers), and precisely replicates itself when cells divide.[2] Now that this piece of information is understood, humans can intervene in the once autonomous molecular systems of reproduction. This organic frontier now has no borders because the basics of DNA become intelligible when one analyzes them using the digital model of information storage, recognition, retrieval, and replication. Digital humans, animals, food, and medicine are now in the marketplace.

Computer science and biology (hardware/software and wetware [flesh infomatics]) reached a parallel maturity in the latter half of the 20th century. That this correlation is coincidence is unlikely, given their shared stake in the development of the digital paradigm. Consequently, even science, like culture and economy, has to suture the divide between the analogic and the digital. Without question, when asking whether natural, social, or economic processes are analogic or digital, the answer at the dawn of the new millennium is: they are both.

Digital Culture

If Henry Ford is the avatar of a digital economy, then his contemporary, Marcel Duchamp, is the avatar of digital aesthetics. With his readymade series, Duchamp struck a mighty blow against the value system of the analogic. Duchamp took manufactured objects, signed and dated them, and placed them in a high culture context. Duchamp's argument was that any given object has no essential value and that the semiotic network in which an object is placed defines its meaning, and hence, its value. If a bottle rack is in a hardware store or next to a sink in a kitchen, its value is defined by its function and its appearance is mundane; however, when it is placed on a pedestal in the legitimizing space of a gallery or museum (where the readymades reside to



3. Cult of the New Eve, *Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, 1999. (Photo courtesy of CAE)*

this day), and when it carries the signature of a legitimized artist, each object becomes a nonfunctional object d'art, and therefore an object of high value. Like Ford, Duchamp was too far ahead of his time. His critique was not widely accepted in a period obsessed with the romantic notions of the artist, when each artwork produced by the elite few and accepted by tastemakers of the time was viewed as a unique testament to artistic genius. No great work of art could be replicated by man or machine.

Half a century later various publics were ready to hear what Duchamp had tried to say earlier. Andy Warhol was emblematic of the many artists, musicians, and writers who reintroduced the idea of the digital to a now eager audience. Warhol discovered that all the people of digital culture really wanted was more of the same. No more unique objects—they wanted the familiar ones that were forever replicated around them. They wanted serial prints of Brillo boxes and Campbell's soup cans produced at Warhol's studio, known as The Factory. The counterfeit was no longer the counterfeit if it met the expectation of sameness. Warhol subverted the modern notion of art, and was loved—and highly paid—for it, not just by an unsophisticated public, but also by a cultural elite who saw his work as unique in making a "new" gesture by destroying the original and reducing art objects to the manufacturing (duplication) principle of equivalence. But Warhol did not stop there; he performed digitality as the first cyborg artist. He was a machine, no different from his constant companion the tape recorder. He was only replicating what he saw around him; he took in the images of culture and spit them out again.

Theatre, of course, has its visionary too. Karl Kraus (1874–1936) brought the digital model of theatre to the attention of the public. He understood that the implosion of fiction and nonfiction into hyperreality could be used for purposes other than perpetuating dominant ideology. He also understood plagiarism as a method for cultural production. These notions came together in Kraus's critique of the European war machine in *The Last Days of Mankind* (1918/19).[3]

Unfortunately, Kraus was unable to conceive of a way to stage the work. He could not think of a way to release it from hyperreality and loop it back into the physical world. Part of the problem was that *Last Days* relied too heavily on narrative structure, but most of the problem was that no looping mechanism had been constructed yet. To this day the construction of this loop[4] is an ongoing and increasingly urgent process, given pancapital's rapid deployment of the digital for its own perpetuation and profit.

Recombinant Theatre

The complex division of labor in late capital is organized around the principle of specialization. As long as a segment is useful it will increase in complexity until a critical mass is reached: then the segment will divide and separate, creating a new area of specialization. During this process, members of a given segment develop numerous models and applications that act as subdividers within an area. Most of the people in these subareas consider them-

selves different from others within the specialization, much as members of the specialization perceive of themselves as inherently different from other specialized segments. The consequence of this situation is that a profound alienation emerges due to competition for resources among and within specializations, along with an inability to communicate effectively with one another due to lexical differences. Segments (and particularly subsegments) become so specialized that they sink into absurdity. How many times have we heard scholars, engineers, scientists, etc., say with pride that there are only a few people in the world who can understand what they do? This situation is an embarrassment that not only breeds alienation within specializations, but also banishes interested nonspecialists (publics) from the stores of knowledge. To be sure, each segment and subsegment has developed some useful element to the same extent that each has serious difficulties. There is no paradigm, model, or application that is not in some kind of critical trouble.

Though this crisis has been recognized over the past few decades, little seems to have been done about it. The division machine has been turned on, and there seems to be no off switch. The most common response to the problem in the fine arts and humanities, both in the university and in the culture industry, is a call for interdisciplinarity. For these institutions, this call is a very poor joke. Disturbing the enlightenment tradition of managing knowledge through specialization would be disruptive to the entire politics, economy, and spatial-temporal relations of these institutions. Second, the digital methods needed to establish interdisciplinary practices are not completely accepted. Cultural education and production are both analogic institutions that reward the individual "genius" who is able to conjure unique and original moments of complex order, and these institutions reject, if not punish, those who engage with methodologies of the copy and with the celebration of the counterfeit. While this topic is sufficient material for a book, suffice it to say that strategies and tactics for unifying divisions among cultural practices will not come from the university or cultural industry centers; rather, it will emerge from the minor sectors and nomadic vectors that place themselves in the anarchistic and liminal zones of digital culture.

The Theatre of Everyday Life

For the past decade, Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) has consistently suggested that recombinant theatre consists of interwoven performative environments through which participants may flow. One of these foundational environments is the theatre of everyday life, which includes street theatre and (for lack of a better term) what Alan Kaprow called "Happenings." When using the term "street theatre," CAE has a very particular meaning in mind. We do not include the tradition of political theatre that presents predetermined narratives "for the people." This type of presentation is merely traditional stage theatre performed outdoors with more ideological flotsam than a Broadway play. Such performances simply import spectacle and passivity into so-called public space. What CAE does consider street theatre are those performances that invent ephemeral, autonomous situations from which temporary public relationships emerge whereby the participants can engage in critical dialogue on a given issue. Traditional examples of this type of activity come from the Living Theatre, the Theatre of the Oppressed, Guerrilla Art Action Group, Rebel Chicano Art Front, and the Situationists.

Clearly, Happenings fit into this model as well. In terms of intention, the differences between Happenings and street theatre are subtle. Perhaps the most obvious difference, albeit superficial, is that Happenings ally themselves with art discourse, while street theatre allies itself with theatre discourse. The other dif-



4. ICFATU (The International Campaign for Free Alcohol and Tobacco for the Unemployed), *1998. Sheffield, UK. In this performance, CAE designed a faux activist campaign in order to create a situation that would reconstruct public space as an autonomous social sector. Here, CAE members acting as ICFATU campaigners give away free beer and cigarettes as a means to attract a diverse public at a main market tram stop. (Photo courtesy of CAE)*

ference is that while street theatre was not recuperated in the West—just ignored—Happenings were reinvented to better serve the culture market. The art world defanged them by turning Happenings into performances and environments into installations. Every politically useful characteristic and experimental motivation that Happenings had in the 1950s and '60s were eliminated in favor of recentering the artist/performer, reconstituting a hushed silence from a passive audience, and reviving predetermined narrative trajectories. These are the very characteristics that recombinant theatre leaves behind; at the same time, recombinant theatre attempts to include compelling anti-authoritarian cultural elements from other models of performative exploration.

Participation, process, pedagogy, and experimentation are the key components for further recombination that come from the theatre of everyday life. Models of cultural participation are the applications of digital aesthetics and organization that best serve resistant practice. Recombinant theatre begins by eliminating the privileged position of the director, auteur, genius, or any other reductive, privatizing category. It undermines that analogic moment in which unique, complex order, manifesting in human form, separates itself from the chaotic rabble, and one voice speaks for the "betterment" of all. At that same moment, through capital's production of repressive social space, the chaotic rabble is digitized into audience form—a homogenized unit. In this process, subjects are fragmented and only a single line of desire is allowed expression—that line of degraded pleasure, that passive line of sight that makes an individual a "normalized" audience member. This singular dimension of subjectivity is replicated in all the individuals who constitute the social constellation, and thus becomes the dominant trait of the whole and the part.

On the other hand, within the relatively horizontalized space of recombinant theatre, individuals are reassembled into an analogic form. Multiple lines of desire as well as numerous forms of social interaction can find expression.

Under these conditions, a loose-knit ephemeral public can emerge. An actual construction of a public (temporary though it may be) through an open field of performative practice makes possible a productive pedagogy not found in the unilateral didacticism of reactive or reactionary politicized art. In this way, a participatory process can emerge out of both rational social interactions and nonrational libidinal trafficking that creates skepticism in an individual about the taken-for-grantedness of the social codes of a given situation. While the instigators of this process do have an empowered position because they choose the topic and launch the event, this discrepancy in power between performer and audience dissolves when the two come in contact, and thus the power functions in a generative manner rather than in one of domination. When the process functions properly, the instigators of the event immediately fall into a mode of deterritorialization, and the process drifts into a multiplicity of unknown directions. No real intentionality exists, since the interaction is process-oriented and thereby subject to many unforseeable causalities and accidents. Only aesthetic products can be fully intentionalized and their quality controlled.

That is why this model remains permanently experimental. The method itself may not be experimental, but its application is. This type of performance is risky because the outcome is always unknown. Like all experiments, this one can fail, and fail in the worst sense. While failure from audience indifference to one's gestures is always possible, experimental performance can decline into a worst-case scenario: a raving reinforcement of authoritarian culture. Once a discourse begins within a differentiated public (the foundation of interdisciplinarity in any practical sense), there is no way to be sure that the internalized ideology of dominant culture or other unfortunate conditioning won't effectively assert themselves. CAE knows by experience that they often do; however, the possibility of an emergent discourse of liberation, followed (one hopes) by the transformation of a public into a coalition, will never happen without open dialogue and minimal expression management. These are risks that must be taken.

Given such praise for the theatre of everyday life, the reader must be wondering, why fix what isn't broken? While this model does work well for liberationist purposes, it has two tremendous shortcomings: the first is that it cannot bear the burden of a complex conceptual structure. As long as the idea the performer wants to bring to the audience is simple and a part of participant members' life experience, the model works well. For example, CAE carried out a guerrilla performance in Sheffield, UK (*The International Campaign for Free Alcohol and Tobacco for the Unemployed [ICFATU]*, 1998), in the hope of revealing some of the hidden structures of domination in everyday life. CAE chose a harmless action that took place in a location where the typical activities of the local population would not be disturbed. The activity chosen was to give away beer and cigarettes. The location selected for the action was a pedestrian mall and transportation artery. Here CAE attempted to inject the expressive possibilities of open exchange found in a public bar into a space that was reserved exclusively for consumption. Although the area was allegedly a public space, no conversation, conviviality, or coming together of diverse groups (or any other characteristic of bourgeois utopian public space) occurred there. Once this managed space was broken by the alien gesture of offering free beer and cigarettes, these very same elements of utopian public space immediately emerged. However, so did other restrictive structures of everyday



5. Intelligent Sperm On-line, *1999*. Globalization, *Rutgers University. CAE produced this performance to call attention to sperm and egg donor recruitment on university campuses for use in neo-eugenic practices. Using SeeUCMe, CAE was able to create the illusion that a reprotech company (BioCom) visiting Rutgers was actively recruiting a sperm donor for a woman who was monitoring the process online from Florida. (Photo courtesy of CAE)*



6. A volunteer (confederate) from the audience offers to be genetically screened and to donate his sperm during Intelligent Sperm On-line, *Rutgers University, 1999. (Photo courtesy of CAE)*

life. For example, the environment that was created demonstrated male privilege. Far fewer women participated, and most of those who entered the environment stood at the periphery and observed the activity from the margins. This social constellation stood out as the perfect representation of the gender hierarchy found in ordinary social space. These and other elements of expression management in the performative realm became immediately visible, particularly for those in the center of the event. The most interesting reaction from the male participants was complete astonishment at the action. The whole context—a moment of meeting new people, having conversations, getting drunk while waiting for the tram, getting free commodities, and so on—seemed so unbelievable that as one man put it, "It's a dream come true." Years of socialization had made it seem impossible that members of the public could appropriate the space of the commodity. In this case, prior to the event, reterritorialization of the space of the commodity through public process could only be imagined in the confines of a personal, interior dreamspace.

These are very basic observations relevant to understanding and to producing social space, but a performance such as this one could not offer even a superficial critique of how this situation of commodity domination had come to pass, or explain the mechanisms through which the ideology of social space had been internalized. In spite of the fact that the performative model worked very well in terms of process, participation, immediacy, and pedagogy, the parameters of discourse were limited, to say the least.

A second major problem with this model lies in its pedagogy. The theatre of everyday life is limited to everyday life. Key issues in liberationist practice that are beyond local and immediate parameters do not register in this model. Indeed, this is a problem for activists as well as for artists. As liberationist practice faces increasingly global or specialized issues, or requires an international constituency for locally based issues, the usefulness of the theatre of everyday life begins to wane. For the theatre of everyday life to function pedagogically, the participants involved must have direct experience with a given issue. For example, the spatial construction of gender inequality illustrated by the example above is something everyone experiences, but does not necessarily recognize. Participation in the theatre of everyday life can make the transparent codes of gender separation/hierarchy opaque and impossible to miss. Once these codes are perceived, a critical understanding quickly follows through dialogue. That is why this model of performance was used so effectively in developing notions of agency and class position in localized third-world colonial struggles.

Unfortunately, many current issues that have drawn the attention of liberationist cultural forces are not so localized, basic, and available. For example, the revolution in biotechnology has brought about numerous social problems—most notably, the resurrection of eugenics. While it has been reconfigured to better fit the current market mechanisms, and although it avoids calling attention to itself as overt social policy, today's eugenics is every bit as pernicious and destructive as the first wave that marked the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The problem is that this time eugenics is an invisible social dynamic that is quietly emerging out of the pancapitalist institutions of

the economy of excess and the nuclear family. How can a pedagogical theatrical environment be constructed in this case? Reproductive technology, and the current direction that molecular biology and medicine (both utopian and oppressive) are taking, is far too removed from everyday life because these practices are still limited in their deployment and the knowledge is so specialized. The idea of molecular invasion and colonization still seems like a science-fiction scenario. On the other hand, the area of the biotech revolution that people seem to find most troubling is genetically modified food production, because here there is a direct experience (anxiety) about the disruption of the daily ritual/necessity of eating.

Along this same line of solving the problem of the absence of experience is the issue of constructing international constituencies around localized social problems. For example, there is an international movement for the liberation of Mumia Abu-Jamal.[5] Once again, supporters are employing the traditional civil rights strategy of using outsider power vectors to shame a localized offender into correcting an injustice. As with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, people with no experiential connection to the situation must be convinced to identify with it. The perceptions and relationships of the support contingents are completely mediated. Perceptions of race relations, police/civilian relationships, prison issues, etc., vary dramatically from culture to culture and from subculture to subculture. The consistent local elements of race relations, police, and prisons do not manifest in the same manner, because the outrage of one locality around this set of relationships is not necessarily the experience of another. Consequently, one local group cannot depend on intersubjective experience as a means to acquire political support for their cause. Globalization has created a new theatre that bursts the boundaries of the theatre of everyday life. We now have a theatre of activism that has emerged out of the necessity of taking material life struggles into hyperreality. Activists are now more than just organizers, negotiators, objectors, and policy manufacturers; they are also inventors of and actors in fully mediated worlds, and are thereby forced into the treachery of representation.

Because of this situation, liberationist performers now must find a way to splice greater conceptual complexity and a more broadly based pedagogy into their performative models. CAE would like to suggest that one potential solution is to use elements from the emerging theatre of information and its attendant technologies. Mechanisms such as a computer that can deliver specialized information in a fast, aestheticized manner have become increasingly necessary and more useful than ever.

The Theatre of Information

The tendency to immediately jump into what is considered the cutting edge of information and communication technology (ICT) is typical for those grounded in a variety of disciplines interested in experimentation within this genre. In the case of the theatre in particular, the tendency is to leap to the construction of a virtual theatre. ICT has promised that a fully interactive, living, virtual theatre is just around the corner if we just stay online. As yet, CAE knows of no virtual theatre that has a multifaceted, interactive social dimension, and certainly nothing with any resistant potential; rather, the virtual theatre available seems to reinforce the worst elements of the disembodiment of the technocratic class for the sake of greater instrumentality.

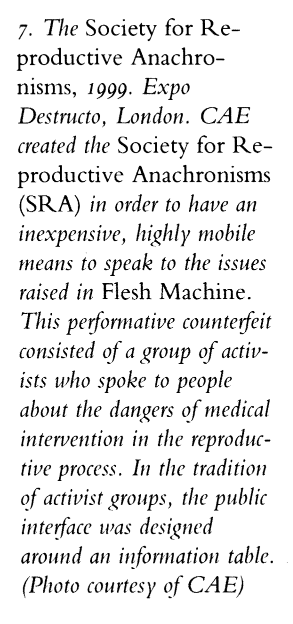
At present, virtual theatre works on two fronts. The first is the use of ICT as a new display technology for older media that intersect performance practices—for example, streaming prerecorded video over the net. Once again the old dis-

course of democratic TV is back, only with the added kicker that the problem of distribution (which undermined the video utopia of the '70s) is solved. CAE does not want to take up space explaining why the net is a poor broadcast technology; however, a broadcast technology with millions of channels tends to dilute the viewer base, and capital-saturated agencies will, as always, be able attract viewers more effectively than those that are impoverished. (This is one of the ways that capital replicates its class system in the alleged neutral zone of virtual space.)

The second front is virtual theatre proper, which tends to manifest in one of two ways. The first manifestation is the virtual community. Whether a text-based or a graphic user interface is used, these simulations of sociability are the most profound testament to the nightmare of disembodiment. Here capital realizes its Cartesian dreams of body elimination by creating an interface that appeals solely to the mind. Not only is the body itself eliminated from the social equation, but any sharing of space by bodies is eliminated. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have persuasively argued in *A Thousand Plateaus* that the matrix of authority is centered on the body. The two most regulated elements of the social world are, first, what can enter and leave the body, and second, what a body may be in proximity to and/or intermingle with. In the case of virtual theatre, nothing is going in or out of the body, nor is it sharing space with anyone or anything other than those objects that produce a space designed purely for production and consumption. In other words, those involved in the virtual theatre are nothing more than neutralized subjects incapable of disrupting the matrix of authority and thus establishing an autonomous subjectivity. For any type of resistant activity, this variety of virtual theatre is useless, despite its democratic claims to provide creative interactivity. Acting in a virtual community is the very definition of what Guy Debord called in *Society of the Spectacle* "enriched privation."

The second is the netcast—using live video streaming of a local theatrical event that is linked to virtual text-communication software such as an Internet Relay Chat. This method invites remote viewing and multi-user commentary. Although this type of technological interface is an improvement over the virtual community of the avatar, it is still an unfortunate hypermediated version





7. The Society for Reproductive Anachronisms, *1999. Expo Destructo, London. CAE created the* Society for Reproductive Anachronisms (SRA) *in order to have an inexpensive, highly mobile means to speak to the issues raised in* Flesh Machine. *This performative counterfeit consisted of a group of activists who spoke to people about the dangers of medical intervention in the reproductive process. In the tradition of activist groups, the public interface was designed around an information table. (Photo courtesy of CAE)*

of social activity. The problems here are simple, and are related to the problems of broadcasting already mentioned. All actions and images are reduced to the same tiny scale, and most people are not accustomed to speaking conversationally in writing. Due to the intense level of technological mediation, these productions are awkward to the extent that being a virtual audience member is certainly a step down from actually attending the event. The hope here (and whether it can be realized satisfactorily remains to be seen) is to free audience members from the limitations of locality, yet it is difficult to know if this liberational characteristic is worth all that must be sacrificed in terms of immediate experience and social interaction.

Another theatrical use for this technology is less grand in its ambitions, but it is functional. ICT can virtually extend the spatial codings and parameters of the theatre space and allow for simulations that otherwise would not be possible. Here the technology is used as a unidirectional performative component rather than as an interactive one. Since the audience members do not have to be at terminals and instead interact only in real space, the use of scale is no longer fixed, because projections can be used. For example, CAE did a performance at Rutgers University (*Intelligent Sperm On-line*, 1999) to call attention to sperm and egg donor recruitment on university campuses for use in neo-eugenic practices. Using SeeUCMe, an internet vision/chat software, CAE was able to provide the illusion that a reprotech company visiting Rutgers was actively recruiting a sperm donor for a woman who was monitoring the process online from Florida. (In actuality, the performer was in a back room of the building.) The effectiveness of this technology was due to the looping back of the virtual into real space, and a surrendering of interactivity in favor of participation.

For the most part, virtual theatre lacks all the redeeming characteristics of theatrical practice, whether they are resistant functions or just pleasurable social functions. The short answer to this problem is simply to argue that the body is still the key building block of theatre, and that if performers are to drift into virtuality, they should find the means to develop feedback loops between the electronic and the organic. However, CAE contends that there is another important piece to this puzzle: the jump from real space to virtual space is premature. The virtual has never been anything more than corporate hype to convince consumers that this time, the technological wish fulfillment machine is a reality. Instead, performers should consider ICT's function as an information organizer. For example, what makes video streaming interesting is not the broadcast potential, but its archival potential (the inverse manifestation of broadcast) to allow viewers fast and immediate access to desired material (after all, the internet's primary function is to be a massive, organized file cabinet). Further, ICT as an information organizer represents a hardware/software combination that could help to solve the conceptual problems raised in the last section, provided that its interconnections with organic bodies are maintained.

ICT is not going to provide community, democracy, expanded consciousness, or interactive theatre, nor will it fulfill any other grandiose utopian wish. It will provide only very poor simulations of these because their complex systems are reduced to the singularity of information exchange. ICT is really only good for one thing—information storage, retrieval, exchange, and display, which it does fast. This one thing is enough to offer a means to deepen the pedagogical dimension of resistant theatrical practice.

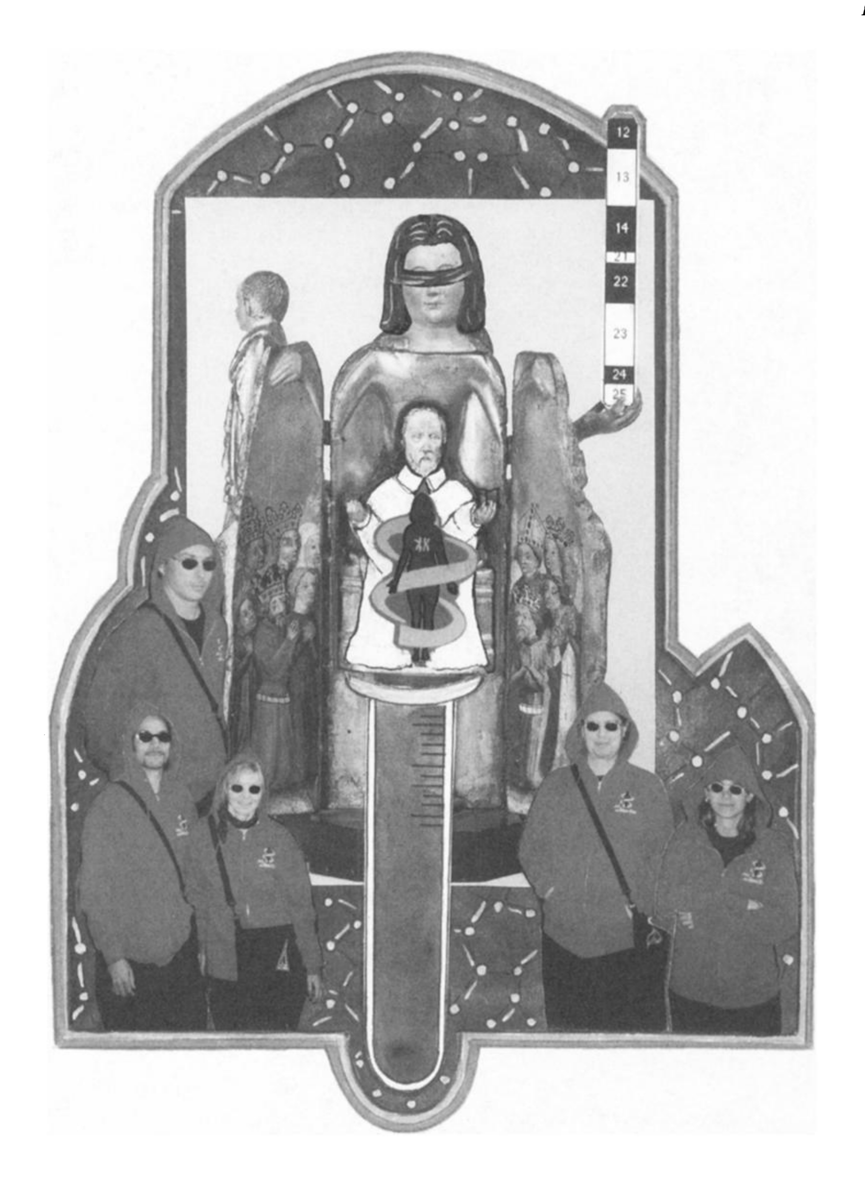
For example, CAE did a large-scale event entitled *Flesh Machine* (1997). During this event, CAE hoped to reveal the eugenic substrata in reprotech. The problem here is obvious: most audience members have no experiential connection with reprotech, so we could not use a method to tease out what they already knew, but had yet to articulate. Nor did the group like the idea

of presenting a manual for the incoming audience to study (CAE did write a book [*Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies, and New Eugenic Consciousness*, Autonomedia, 1998] on the subject that would function well in this capacity, but it would not solve the problem of there being no lived experience—critical texts have very definite limits). As Paulo Freire has pointed out in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the "banking method" of education is of modest use in raising critical consciousness because it is not grounded in the meaningful structures of everyday life. Somehow, the collective had to devise a means to impart basic background information on reprotech under performance conditions so that information could lend support to an emerging experiential process. To make matters more difficult, the two had to fit together somewhat seamlessly.

CAE's answer was to use computers to deliver and seductively display the information. The collective created a CD-Rom with information on medical procedures, the diary of a couple going through in vitro fertilization, an electronic children's book, and so on. The heart of the electronic presentation was an actual genetic screening test. A code was written for the test that allowed the computer to assess a participant's answers, and reward he/r with a certificate of genetic merit or reject he/r with a curt notice of insufficient genetic quality. When one takes the test, it becomes abundantly clear that it is not just a medical document. It also notes one's aesthetic traits (such as skin color and quality) and searches for talents and abilities (intelligence, coordination, creativity, etc.). In this way, many participants comprehended very quickly and clearly the structure of genetic stratification and the markers of value latent in the test. Consequently, the audience learned how easily the flesh is commodified. This process was then reinforced by allowing those who passed the test to proceed in the event by having their blood taken for DNA extraction and amplification, and by having a cell sample cryopreserved. During the process, the participants interacted not only with the performers, but also with computer technicians, doctors, nurses, lab technicians, and scientists. For that period, they were immersed in the hyperreality of the flesh machine in a way that offered them an active experience of new eugenics and its tremendously complex cultural context.

To be sure, this experiment in recombinant theatre was conducted under the best of all possible conditions. Both the issue under examination and the audience for this work lent themselves to a functional use of the theatre of information. The participants were overwhelmingly young and middle class and (as to be expected) computer literate. This computer literacy translates perfectly into bioliteracy since it is just another form of infomatics/cybernetics. Consequently, this audience was primed to consume this information with ease.

In answer to the issue of producing work that has limited audience potential, CAE designed a simpler action that could reach a broader audience. In 1998 CAE created the *Society for Reproductive Anachronisms (SRA)*. This performative counterfeit consisted of a group of activists that spoke to people about the dangers of medical intervention in the reproductive process. In the tradition of activist groups, the public interface was designed around an information table. The *SRA* had the usual pamphlets and flyers, but it also offered computerized information. This included information on the positive aspects of genetic anomalies, reproductive fashion tips (such as the use of codpieces to raise sperm count), herbal remedies for reproductive problems, a genetic screening test (in which a participant was rewarded for failing), and much more. The main goal here was to produce an action that could be realized under almost any social condition. Production costs were extremely low, so any group or institution could sponsor the project.[6] If participants had no computer skills, someone was at the table to help them. With a very simple ges-



8. From Prophecies of the New Eve, *an agitprop booklet created to accompany the CAE performance* Cult of the New Eve, *1999. (Courtesy of CAE)*

ture, a lot of complex information could be conveyed in an entertaining and inexpensive manner. While this piece was dialogic and the scripts were self-generated (as with *Flesh Machine*), this event did lack the broad variety of voices that helped make *Flesh Machine* so meaningful.

Research into this recombinant type of theatre is only just beginning. Many more experiments will have to be conducted and computer literacy will have to increase before it can fully and successfully be deployed in manifold situations. Whether computer literacy will grow beyond the classes of the technocracy is unknown, so it's possible that this form of recombinant theatre will not be useful in more challenging situations. However, where and when it does work, it contributes to a process in which social segments share space in a generative way, spheres of knowledge intersect, and new varieties of political connectedness emerge. The thinking and the doing do not end at the close of the event, but continue into everyday life, thus creating a never-ending theatre of becoming.

Notes

1. *Ed. Note:* In the early part of the 20th century, Frederick W. Taylor made "time and motion" studies designed to remove redundancy and inefficiency from the industrial line. Taylor's stated purpose was both to make working on the line easier for the workers and more productive, and therefore more profitable, for the owners. Henry Ford used Taylor's work in laying out the Model T line. Taylor was very much appreciated in the Soviet Union where his ideas were widely applied. In the arts, Taylorism was one of the foundations for constructivism and Meyerhold's biomechanics.
2. Here CAE is only talking about an abstraction for understanding the function of DNA, and not the concrete manifestation. In actuality, DNA's replication process is just short of perfect.
3. *The Last Days of Mankind* was originally published in Kraus's journal *Die Fackel* between 1918 and 1919. It appeared in book form in 1922.
4. The loop begins with a real event that is abstracted into language (Kraus generally used newspapers and journals as a found resource for the latter portion of the loop). He would then recombine the articles into new texts; however, he was unable to complete the loop because he could not transform these texts back into a concrete social form. His only option was a traditional staging of his work, which would have taken approximately 10 evenings (assuming it could be staged at all). The alien nature of his "play" was noticed by Kraus when he stated in the book's preface that the text was "intended for theater on Mars."
5. Mumia Abu-Jamal is a former Black Panther, a radical journalist, and a supporter of MOVE (a revolutionary Afrocentric group) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Mumia was convicted of killing a police officer, and is held on death row in State Correctional Institution Greene, in Greene County, Pennsylvania. Many prison rights activists, equal rights activists, human rights activists, and individuals around the world believe Mumia was falsely accused and unjustly jailed as so many Black radicals had been before him.
6. Institutions that did sponsor the project include Rutgers University Graduate Student Union, 1999 (student sponsorship); Expo Destructo (hacker/interventionist underground), London, 1999; The Cell Collective (independent organizers of cultural actions) at Saint Clara Hospital, Rotterdam, 1999; Shedhalle (traditional art center), Zurich, 2000.

Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) *is a collective of five tactical media practitioners of various specializations including computer graphics, film/video, photography, text art, book art, and performance. Formed in 1987, CAE's focus has been on exploring the intersections between art, critical theory, technology, and political activism. The collective has performed and produced projects for an international audience, and has written three books:* The Electronic Disturbance *(Autonomedia, 1994), and its companion text,* Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas *(Autonomedia, 1996), and* Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies, and New Eugenic Consciousness *(Autonomedia, 1997).*